

Rabbits and Allergies

People often ask, “If I’m allergic to cats will I also be allergic to rabbits?” The answer I always give is, “It depends.” Some rabbit enthusiasts I know started with rabbits as children **because** they were allergic to cats and dogs. My husband, who is horribly allergic to cats, is only mildly allergic to most rabbits and coexists with our ten rabbits without the need for antihistamines. However, there seem to be individual rabbits that he is extremely allergic to. The same is true of my veterinarian who is mildly allergic to some rabbits and very allergic to others. Her allergies to cats are similar.

In addition to animal allergies, families considering adopting a rabbit need to consider whether any member is allergic to **hay**. (Note: Hay fever is a generic term for pollen allergies and may have no relationship to an actual hay allergy.) Hay is the most important element of a healthy rabbit’s diet. It is the main source of fiber and is crucial to keeping a rabbit’s sensitive GI tract working properly.

If someone in your family suffers from allergies and you are not sure how they will react to either rabbits or hay, see if they can spend some time helping with rabbits at a shelter or rabbit foster home. If they can spend a few hours in an environment with several rabbits and hay, chances are good that they will be able to live comfortably with one or two rabbits. Since allergies can be rabbit-specific, be sure the person with allergies is included in selecting your family’s rabbit — and don’t be upset with them if they have symptoms around certain rabbits. Allergies cannot be helped and it is better to find out early in the selection process rather than after you have brought a rabbit home.

If your allergies are mild and you are determined to share your home with a rabbit, here are some tips to manage your allergies while sharing your home with a rabbit:

- When interacting with your rabbit, be careful to keep your hands away from your face. Be diligent about washing your hands any time you have touched your rabbit.
- Restrict your rabbit’s access to your bedroom.
- Have a non-allergic (or the least allergic) family member handle hay and clean the litter-box.
- Vacuum frequently, especially when your rabbit is shedding.
- Speak to your doctor about medications to manage allergy symptoms.

With my husband, I also learned it was wise to **start** with the rabbits in an area where I spent more time than he did — the kitchen or my bathroom. We gradually allowed the rabbits access to rooms he spent time in, starting with short visits and slowly increasing the amount of time they spent together. This gradual approach worked well for him and he has, thankfully, never been allergic to a family member, perhaps because he fears that he is the one that would have to leave if he was allergic!